
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Students' Perceptions of their First Practice Placement in Early Childhood Care and Education

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Abstract

It is widely accepted in higher education that practice placements facilitate students' professional development by providing a beneficial learning environment, the chance to experience the 'world of work' and to develop the skills of a competent practitioner. However, the transition from college to practice placement, adjusting to new learning environments and managing workload demands can be challenging for students. This paper explores some of these issues. It investigates students' perceptions regarding their first practice placement on an Early Childhood Care and Education programme in a third-level college in the Republic of Ireland. The study examines students' views on specific aspects of placement, including preparation, management of the assessment portfolio and reflective journal, experience of supervision and opportunities for acquiring new skills and competencies.

A self-administered, non-experimental survey, comprising closed and open questions, was utilised to allow the gathering of specific statistical information (quantitative) as well as students' views and opinions (qualitative) of placement experiences. The findings indicate that the first practice placement was, in general, a positive experience, whereby students enjoyed opportunities to work with children and link theory to practice. However, it was found that there were difficulties in a) writing regular journal entries and reflective writing, b) completing child observations and c) implementing a planned intervention. A substantial number struggled with portfolio workloads together with other placement duties.

Keywords: placement, learning, reflection, early childhood

Introduction

The B.A. in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is an honours degree programme in a higher education institution in the Republic of Ireland, which provides students with a professional qualification to enable them to work in a variety of early years settings. The programme combines theoretical and practical components central to students' training as Early Years Professionals. Two practice placements (worth 30/60 credits each annually) are

arranged by the academic institution for each student. The first placement takes place in Year Two (Semester Four) and the second in Year Three (Semester Six). Placement One usually occurs in day care and family resource centres. The institute is one of eight Institutes of Technology that provide a level-eight degree in ECCE in Ireland.

This paper presents the results of an evaluative study which explored the perceptions of 49 full-time ECCE students regarding their first practice placement. The study examined all aspects of the student learning experience on placement, including learning opportunities, i.e. skills or competencies gained, in particular child observations and intervention; preparation for practice placement; experience of keeping a reflective journal; management of the assessment requirements; and experience of supervision.

Literature review

In a review of literature on practice placements, such issues as student learning on placement, reflection, assessment portfolios, supervision, skills/competency acquisition and preparation for placement have been identified. These topics will be explored below and dealt with under the headings of 'Learning through practice placements' and 'Preparation for placement'.

Learning through practice placements

It is acknowledged in higher education that practice placements provide a beneficial learning environment for undergraduate students and are a vital component of the students' academic experience. Theory covered in college gives students a knowledge base, but practice placements provide the settings in which students are afforded the opportunity to link theory with practice, under the supervision of a proficient practitioner.

For Early Childhood students, practice placement permits students to experience what it is like to work with babies, toddlers and young children, and to develop skills and competencies working with children. Practice placement provides the opportunity for 'professional development where the student can reflect on, analyse and evaluate professional practice' (Douglas cited in Corbett and Ridgway 2004, p93). Douglas also reports that placement allows students opportunities to put theory, ideas and activities 'generated in the taught elements of the course into practice' (p94). This is supported by Brown and Danaher (2008, p156) who maintain that practice placements enable students to link theory and practice, and see 'how suited they really are to early childhood education as a career'. In addition, in the European context, it is recognised that a 'reciprocal and recursive interaction between theory and practice' is a fundamental factor in the successful training of an early years practitioner's competence (CoRe 2011, p105).

Reflection and reflective journals

While on placement students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, linking theory covered in college to practical situations in the workplace. In recent years, reflection and reflective practice have become popular themes in healthcare and education and are advocated as a method for bridging the theory–practice divide (Burrows 1995, Scanlan, Care and Udod 2001, Nicoll and Higgins 2002). In addition, journal writing has become prevalent in higher education for documenting reflections on events and experiences. Even though reflection and reflective writing are widespread in many undergraduate programmes, learning to reflect and write reflectively can be a challenging task and takes time to develop. Burrows (1995, p350) suggests that 'reflective practice is a complex and a cognitively demanding skill'. Similarly, O'Keefe and Tait (2004) agree that

students can experience difficulty with reflective processes, a point supported by Carlile and Jordan (2007, p31) who acknowledge that 'many people find reflective writing difficult'.

Owen and Stupans (2009) advise that students need 'scaffolding' in learning how to reflect, and they suggest that structures be put in place to assist students progress beyond recall and comprehension, to develop the skill of deep, critical reflection. This is endorsed by Allin and Turnock (2007) who observe that students need time to develop reflective skills, as they are an essential component of practice. They recommend the summing up of daily experiences with reflective comments in a diary or journal, suggesting that students are more likely to keep and benefit from a reflective diary if they are required to reflect on their practice in a structured way.

However, this view of writing daily journal entries contrasts with the opinion of Burrows (1995) who claims that daily entries in a diary are not necessary and may be self-defeating. She maintains that while students can be conscientious about keeping a reflective journal initially, they soon tire of them, get bored and often claim they are not writing anything new.

Assessment portfolio

In undergraduate programmes, the reflective journal assists in the writing of the placement portfolio. The use of portfolios as a learning and assessment tool has been adopted in recent years in many health and education programmes. Alsop and Ryan (2001) describe a portfolio as a collection of relevant information compiled to provide evidence of learning. It is often used as a means of recording student experiences of placement. A portfolio provides the opportunity to document learning on placement and demonstrate evidence of professional development.

Ridgway (2005) explains that the early childhood placement portfolio is considered important in practice placement, although students find it difficult to compile. In her view, learning to become a reflective practitioner takes time and the student must be coached and supported in developing portfolios. Scholes *et al.* (2004) conclude that portfolios are very time-consuming and challenging. Corcoran and Nicholson (2004) agree that they are time-consuming and maintain that students experienced anxiety in completing portfolios. However, McMullan (2006) believes that portfolios can be a successful assessment and learning tool if there are clear guidelines and comprehensive support for both students and student supervisors.

In the training of social care practitioners, Graham and Megarry (2005) claim that the portfolio provides students with a structure and design which assists in documenting evidence of learning and development on placement. They further recommend that the layout of portfolios should consist of a maximum of four sections and an upper limit of 7000 words. Upper word limits are also advocated by Biggs and Tang (2007) who contend that one of the problems with a portfolio is that students can create excessive work loads with no word limit. They suggest four items for a portfolio, and recommend 2000 words for the reflective essay. Their general rule is that the portfolio should not exceed an average assignment or project.

Supervision

Supervision of students on practice placement is a highly important aspect of undergraduate programmes. The supervisor is defined as a staff member who works in the placement environment and supervises or mentors the student during work placement. Alsop and Ryan (2001) report that supervision on placement enables the 'student to explore and increase knowledge and understanding of professional practice' (p131), and to develop skills and knowledge of their profession. Similarly, with regard to the training of social care students, Lalor & Doyle (cited in Share & McElwee 2005) state that supervision of students

on practice placement is where they have the opportunity to gain from the support of an experienced practitioner. Supervision of Early Childhood students on placement is an essential element of training (Ridgway 2005). Corbett and Ridgway (2004) maintain that the challenges faced by students on placement can be resolved with guidance from experienced placement supervisors. In their study, ten of the twelve Early Childhood students were assigned a placement supervisor immediately on starting placement and had daily contact with him/her. Responsibilities of the supervisor in an ECCE setting include guidance on interactions with children, assistance in selecting children to observe and in selecting a child for whom to provide an intervention. In addition, the ECCE supervisor should read and sign off on all observations written up and have regular meetings with students to monitor progress. However, while supervisors have an advisory role, they do not determine the final grade of the student's placement.

Preparation for placement

According to *The model framework for education training and professional development in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, DJELR 2002), professional education for future early childhood educators 'is a major factor in achieving the provision of high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education services'. Practice placements are the cornerstone of professional training in the ECCE sector. This is echoed by Corbett and Ridgway (2004) who contend that high-quality practice placements for Early Childhood students are needed to achieve the highest standards in the ECCE profession in Ireland.

Students need basic skills before embarking on a placement in order to build confidence and readiness to undertake placement activities. In a study with nursing undergraduates, Morgan (2006) highlights the importance of students having adequate time to practise clinical skills, so that they are prepared for placement and are able to carry out their duties competently. Similarly, Corbett and Ridgway (2004) found that many of their Early Childhood students acknowledged the need for more training in practical skills and noted that their students would like more time in a skills laboratory to practise activities for use on placement. They recommended including a practical skills workshop to promote a better understanding of practice supported by theory during placement.

Skills and competencies

A core skill that ECCE students need to practise and perfect is child observation. Child observation methods are the tools of the Early Years Professional. They provide an objective, reliable and valid means of gathering data on children's development and behaviour so that practitioners can plan for children's further development and progress. Observation is considered an essential skill in working with young children and is therefore a skill in which ECCE students must develop competence. Placement offers students opportunities to practise these skills under the supervision of an experienced professional. Fawcett (2009, p125) notes that it takes time to become confident and skilled in using various observation methods, and argues that 'the skills of observation will be best developed through experiential learning on the job'. However, the literature suggests that child observation skills are difficult to acquire and take a lot of practice to develop (Hobart and Frankel 2004, Fawcett 2009, Hayes 2010).

There are several observation methods the Early Years Professional can employ in working with young children. The event sample method, for example, can be used if there is a concern about a particular child (see Table 1). It records the frequency of episodes of aggressive or disruptive conduct; what happened before the incident (antecedent); whether the behaviour was provoked or not; who was involved and the consequences. The

Table 1 Event Sample Observation

Event Sample Observation used to document the behaviour of TC (TC = target child, i.e. child being observed), aged 2 years and 11 months. TC has been attending the service for over two years. He has recently begun to act aggressively towards some of the other children; in particular there have been incidents with pulling hair, grabbing toys and kicking. Several children have become upset as a result of these incidents. (Donoghue and Gaynor 2011)

Date	Time	Duration	Provoked/unprovoked	Who with	Antecedent	Description of behaviour	Consequence
Jun 3	9.30	30 secs	UP	Alone	None	TC walks over to the bricks and sweeps them onto the floor. Kicks them around.	A goes to speak to him. Asks him to pick them up. TC begins to cry.
Jun 3	10.05	1 min	P	FJ	J has pulled the bowl of crayons over to herself. They had both been using them out of the same bowl.	TC pulls the crayons back. Reaches over and grab's J's picture, tears it up. Pushes her in the chest.	J cries. A walks over to comfort J. Asks TC why he has torn the picture. Tells him to leave the table.

information gathered can assist in developing a plan to manage the child's behaviour (Donoghue & Gaynor 2011).

During training, student Social Care Professionals are required to carry out a planned intervention while on placement whereby they should demonstrate the ability to identify a client's needs, design an appropriate intervention, and evaluate it (Forkan & McElwee 2002, Graham & Megarry 2005). The intervention must be carried out over five sessions to allow the student to demonstrate use of principles from professional studies, developmental psychology and creative studies.

Similarly, in the ECCE context a further skill students in the Institute must acquire on practice placement is to be able to plan, carry out and evaluate an intervention with a young child. This intervention is a programme of activities (e.g. arts and crafts; games), designed to support a child in a specific area of his/her development and/or behaviour. It should be carried out over one week, involving the selection and implementation of five activities (one activity per day), carefully chosen to support the child. The term 'intervention' is one that is used frequently in social work and social care and has therapeutic connotations associated with it, but is not synonymous with Early Childhood programmes. The intervention on the ECCE programme in the Institute was adapted from the social care practice programme.

Summary of literature review

From a review of the literature, several issues seem significant. There is an absence of research on practice placements within the Early Childhood sector in the Irish, English and European contexts. A search of the databases Web of Science, Science Direct and Academic Search Complete did not reveal any article specific to the research topic. There is therefore scope for research on the preparation, supervision and learning during placements of ECCE students. The literature highlights that the ability to reflect, and write

reflectively, although an important element of learning, can be difficult skills to acquire. In addition, portfolios are a popular tool for documenting learning on placement, but are time-consuming and challenging. Students need clarity on the structure of the portfolio and on the competency/skill being assessed. Supervision of students on practice placement is a responsible role, and clarification of the roles of both student and supervisor is required. Preparation for skills training prior to placement is essential, so that students carry out their duties with confidence and competence. Finally, selecting and managing high-quality placements is paramount in training undergraduate students for health and caring professions, and this includes ECCE placements.

In response to issues arising from the literature review, the aim of this study was to obtain ECCE students' perceptions of their first practice placement. The objectives were to discover the students' views on their preparation for practice placement, skills acquisition and their learning opportunities while on placement.

Research Design

A self-completion questionnaire was developed (see Appendix A) comprising both closed and open questions, aimed at collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. To avoid researcher bias, questions were developed as a result of the research question, i.e. 'In relation to the first practice placement of the ECCE programme what are students' perceptions of:

1. preparation for the first placement?
2. skills acquisition and learning opportunities during the placement?
3. their own engagement with reflective activities during the placement?
4. their experience of supervision during the placement?'

Key themes were selected (e.g. reflection, supervision, management of portfolio, development of skills and competencies and preparation for placement) and questions were drafted around them. There were 15 closed questions in the questionnaire, but students could elaborate on certain topics in ten of the fifteen questions. Also, students could provide suggestions or comments at the end of the questionnaire. Open-ended questions allowed for personal opinions to be expressed.

Sampling strategy

The method of sampling used was 'purposive'. The sample consisted of 63 female (entire cohort) full-time third-year Early Childhood students who had completed their first practice placement. The students had been informed about the research on placement review day, which was held on the final day before the summer break, and further information was provided on their return to college in September after they had received their placement grade. It was explained that their participation in the collection of data would be greatly appreciated. The questionnaire was then administered online. The researcher was not their lecturer at that time.

Data analysis

Data from closed questions were processed using Google Documents (a free, online software package). Bar charts and pie charts displayed data from the closed questions and the responses to open-ended questions were recorded (question by question) on an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate analysis of the qualitative data. Responses were coded with reference to key themes that reflected the research question, and representative samples were selected for each question.

Ethical considerations

As a member of professional and academic bodies, the author was bound by a code of professional ethics which addresses issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the prevention of harm to research participants. Permission was sought and received from the Head of the Department of Humanities to conduct this research. Students were provided with a detailed account of why and how the research was being conducted and their anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed, as there was no possibility of distinguishing respondents with the online survey utilised. Verbal consent was obtained to complete the survey online from the participants, who were all over the age of 18.

Findings and discussion of findings

A total of 49 responses (78%) were recorded from the purposive sample (n = 63). The findings are presented below and discussed under the headings of: 'Reflective journal'; 'Learning portfolio'; 'Supervision'; 'Child observations'; 'Intervention' and 'Preparation for placement'.

Reflective journal

Previous studies have identified that learning to reflect and write reflectively is difficult, time-consuming and requires practice (Burrows 1995, O'Keefe & Tait 2004, Allin & Turnock 2007, Carlile & Jordan 2007). It is interesting that even though 73% of respondents found writing regular entries in a reflective journal 'easy' or 'manageable', 26% reported that they experienced difficulties writing journal entries (10% found it 'extremely challenging'), supporting the literature in the field. Reflecting the assertions by Burrows (1995) that while students write regularly in their journals at first, they soon complain of repetition, respondents in the present research also experienced repetition in writing their entries.

[BQ] "I found it hard writing it up every day that I was there because I found myself repeating myself." (R6)

Difficulty with reflective writing itself was also cited as a reason for experiencing problems with journal entries.

[BQ] "It was hard to put entries in my reflective journal every day, but I think this was due more to the fact that I struggled with reflective writing." (R37)

While some students struggled with reflective writing, the majority (98%) stated that the journal helped with the reflective essay in their learning portfolio. Respondents indicated that the journal entries aided recall of feelings and events and helped them track progress.

[BQ] "It helped as I was able to have my whole experience written down. The journal showed me my progress throughout the 13 weeks and so I could easily see the situations that helped me grow through placement, which I felt was essential for the reflective essay." (R31)

Interestingly, 55% of respondents reported competency in reflective writing on completion of placement, while 43% reported that they were 'beginning to' write reflectively. This suggests that despite difficulties with writing reflectively, progress was made during placement.

Learning portfolio

The issues with portfolios appear to be that their completion is time-consuming, demanding, and can create levels of anxiety for students (Scholes *et al.* 2004,

McMullan 2006). Without structure and limits on word counts students can 'go overboard' and create excessive workloads (Biggs & Tang 2007, p222). In this research, this is supported by over half of respondents (51% found the portfolio tasks 'challenging' or 'extremely challenging'). It appears that the problem was not related to the portfolio itself, but to the completion of a seven-section portfolio. Respondents indicated that portfolio tasks were a lot of work, along with all other tasks for completion on placement. They reported working long hours during the day, and then they had to complete college work.

[BQ] "It was just really hard to complete the tasks. There was a lot of work to do on placement. We worked long hours and then we had to do all the observations, intervention and the portfolio tasks." (R36)

Taking into consideration the findings from this research and the views of Biggs and Tang (2007) and Graham and Megarry (2005) regarding the number of sections and word limits, it is worth examining whether a seven-section portfolio with no upper word limit is the most effective learning tool for the first ECCE practice placement.

Supervision

The importance of supervision and supportive practice placements for facilitating learning is well documented (Alsop & Ryan 2001, Corbett & Ridgway 2004, Lalor & Doyle 2005, Ridgway 2005, McClure 2007). Supportive practice placements are essential to student learning, as experienced practitioners can model how theory is integrated into practice. Most respondents (98%) indicated that they felt welcomed to their placement, and induction was received by 84%. 88% indicated that they were allocated a supervisor in their first week. However, supervision experience did not continue as expected for some respondents. Only 76% had a meeting with their supervisor in that first week and only 45% had weekly meetings with their placement supervisor subsequently. These findings are similar to those of the study by Corbett and Ridgway (2004), in which only ten out of the 12 Early Childhood Studies students were assigned a supervisor immediately on starting placement. However, they differ in terms of contact with the supervisor in that the ten students (83%) in the Corbett & Ridgway study had daily contact with their supervisor.

Child observations

All of the respondents (100%) felt either 'somewhat prepared' (43%) or 'very prepared' (57%) to carry out child observations on placement.

[BQ] "We were given very good information on how we were supposed to do them and what was expected and not expected. We were shown how to do them and got to practice them during class, which was very beneficial." (R7)

However, in terms of actually completing child observations in the placement setting, a total of 67% of respondents found this activity either 'challenging' or 'extremely challenging'.

[BQ] "I picked the child observations because I found them hard at times and would get confused. I found the write-up after it difficult and linking what I had seen in the ob to theory." (R4)

Linked to this, students reported that they would like more time for child observation training and an opportunity to gain 'more experience using them before placement'.

[BQ] "There was not enough time in the developmental psychology module to be prepared for the observation as well as the other topics that have to be covered. I think there should be workshops on observations separate to developmental psychology." (R5)

It is interesting to note that despite the complexity of acquiring these skills, all respondents reported that they had either developed child observation skills (80%) or 'were beginning to develop these skills' (20%) on placement.

Access to relevant age group of children to carry out child observations

Students must complete six child observations during placement on the following age ranges: two on babies under 12 months old, two on a child aged 1–3 and two on a child aged 4–6. While 94% (n = 46) said they had access to the group aged 1–3 and 92% (n = 45) had access to children aged 4–6, only 65% (n = 32) had access to those under 12 months old. The 36% of students who did not have access to babies under 12 months old overcame this problem by observing a friend's baby, a relative's baby, or a neighbour's baby (see Table 2 for an example of questions and responses). This raises a concern, as highlighted by Fawcett (2009), that students should always carry out their observations on a child who is unknown to them in order to achieve objectivity. Subjectivity increased if students chose a baby well known to them.

Intervention

The majority of respondents reported that they were prepared to some extent to carry out an intervention (92%, n = 45), while a small number (8%, n = 4) felt they were not prepared at all.

[BQ] "We were slowly and clearly talked through what we had to do in the intervention in class." (R35)

However, when it came to carrying out the planned intervention, 69% (n = 34) of the respondents expressed difficulty, while 31% (n = 15) rated the task 'easy' or 'manageable'. One of the reasons for the difficulty was trying to incorporate it into an already very busy day.

[BQ] "I found the intervention difficult to plan and work around the service's routine." (R45)

Other respondents said they were 'confused' about the intervention and perhaps lacked the confidence to complete the task.

[BQ] "I found the intervention challenging as I had never done this type of thing before and I felt it could have been explained better to the students before going on placement." (R18)

Despite these difficulties, 100% of respondents claimed that, during their placement, they had at least begun to develop the skills/competency required to carry out a planned intervention.

Preparation for placement

Organising and selecting suitable placements, and preparing students for placement, are crucial tasks for the Placement Co-ordinator. With approximately 120 students (combination of Years Two and Three) to place annually, it is an enormous undertaking. Even with these large numbers, 94% of students indicated that they were either 'very prepared' or 'somewhat prepared' for placement.

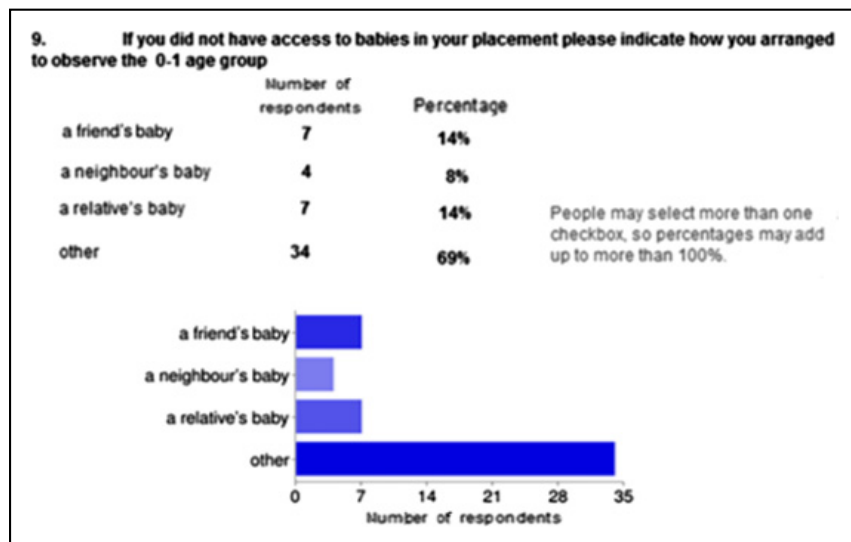
[BQ] "We were told in advance how everything usually works and what is appropriate and what is not. We were given guidelines, handouts and a handbook to help us if we had any troubles." (R7)

Table 2 Sample question and replies from the questionnaire

9. If you did not have access to babies in your placement please indicate how you arranged to observe the 0–1 age group:

a friend's baby a neighbour's baby a relative's baby other
 please specify

Question 9 Respondent replies



Observing the 0–1 age group if there were no babies in placement

Responses to Question 9 including sample replies to 'other (please specify)'	
Where access to babies was not available in the placement setting, students overcame this problem in the following ways:	14% carried out observations on a friend's baby
	14% observed a relative's baby
	8% observed a neighbour's baby
	69% of respondents said other
Respondent 1	didn't observe that age group
Respondent 2	a younger sibling of another child in the crèche who was not currently attending the crèche
Respondent 22	the children I babysit
Respondent 45	I did my observations on the youngest toddlers in the placement with the go-ahead from my visiting tutor

However, areas for improvement were identified. Respondents indicated that they would like placement preparation classes to be more organised and would like their placements arranged early to avoid feeling 'rushed'.

[BQ] "In my opinion, I thought the placement preparation classes were badly organised. There was a lot of confusion about where I was attending." (R20)

In addition, respondents said they would like to have their tutor allocated earlier. It is worth noting from the responses that anxiety was created for the respondents when visited by a lecturer who was unknown to them.

[BQ] "Placement did all come together but it was very rushed. I was also uneasy when my visiting tutor wasn't a lecturer I was familiar with, and I found it hard to be at ease during the visit." (R9)

Knowing the allocated visiting tutor or meeting the visiting tutor before hand was a recommendation made from respondents in the section 'suggestions for future placements'. The visiting tutor is a member of the ECCE team who visits and assesses the student twice during placement. Twenty per cent of placement marks are allocated to these visits.

Placement: a positive learning experience

The findings of this study indicate that practice placement, although challenging, can be a beneficial educational experience. In this research, 98% (n = 48) of respondents indicated that they either 'enjoyed' or 'somewhat enjoyed' their first placement. The opportunities to work with children and to link theory learned in college to the real world were valued by respondents.

[BQ] "I loved the opportunity to work with children, and I also loved seeing our theory in practice, especially Developmental Psychology." (R21)

Specifically, respondents indicated that many skills and competencies were acquired on placement, from linking the theory of child development to practice, using arts and crafts to enhance child development, carrying out observations and intervention, using toys and equipment to work with children, working as a member of a team, keeping routine records and writing reflectively.

[BQ] "Overall, I thought placement was very beneficial and felt the lecturers and supervisor were very helpful and I really think placement is a brilliant idea to show students what they will be doing in the future." (R8)

Interestingly the friendliness of staff was also given as a reason why students enjoyed placement.

[BQ] "I really enjoyed my placement because I found all the staff in the crèche very kind, welcoming and helpful, which made my experience so much more enjoyable and it allowed me to feel free to ask questions if needed without being nervous around the staff." (R11)

It is clear from a review of the responses that the workload for students on placement is of concern. A solution was identified by Respondent 46:

[BQ] "Maybe cut down the workload for placement because it can be too much especially when you don't finish most days until six and after working all day with children and babies you are tired. The observations were very time-consuming and linking theory to practice was a bit hard so maybe practice more of that before you go out on placement."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the research was to explore ECCE students' perceptions of their first placement, with a view to identifying weaknesses and finding possible solutions. A number of conclusions and recommendations for change have been highlighted, and the ECCE Placement Committee has addressed many of the issues raised.

Firstly, over a quarter of students (26%) indicated that they experienced difficulties with writing regular journal entries, suggesting that they required assistance to develop reflective skills. This has been addressed by the recent introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in the ECCE programme of a range of models of reflection and reflective journal-writing to facilitate student engagement.

Secondly, over half of the respondents (51%) reported that they found compiling the portfolio demanding along with all the tasks to be completed on placement. The Placement Committee has reviewed and restructured the portfolio to include an upper word limit, and address skills/competencies that the student must develop while on placement.

Thirdly, while 92% of respondents claimed that supervisors were supportive, less than half (45%) had weekly meetings with their supervisor. A further finding of concern is that one student said she was left alone unsupervised to work with young children. The significance of these findings identified the need for additional training and support for placement supervisors. Therefore, a supervisors' workshop has been organised by the Placement Co-ordinator to provide guidance and support to supervisors of ECCE students on placement.

Fourthly, all respondents (100%) claimed that they were prepared in child observation skills (to some degree) prior to placement and all had either developed or 'were beginning to develop these skills' on placement. However, completing child observations on placement was 'challenging' or 'extremely challenging' for 67%. Difficulty with acquisition of these skills accounted for this struggle and additional skills training was required. An extra tutorial hour has been allocated per week to ensure that adequate time is given in the skills laboratory for observation skills training.

Fifthly, while the majority of respondents (92%) indicated that they were prepared to some extent to carry out an intervention, 69% experienced difficulty with this in practice. Difficulties experienced by the students included incorporating the intervention into an already very busy day, coupled with confusion concerning the term 'intervention'. The purpose of an intervention on the ECCE programme was considered by the Placement Committee and it has been replaced by the term 'planned activity' (i.e. cutting and sticking, making play dough or reading a story), which is a more suitable term for working with young children and requires less time to complete.

Finally, the majority of respondents (94%) claimed they were either 'somewhat prepared' or 'very prepared' for placement, but indicated they would like placement preparation classes to be more organised and less rushed. In addition, students would like to have their placements and visiting tutor allocated earlier in the semester. A further finding was that only 65% of respondents had access to observe babies (0–12 months). While it may not be possible to allocate the visiting tutor early in the semester, it is important that placement preparation classes are satisfactorily organised. Checklist forms have been developed which require students to document the regularity of supervision sessions and access to age groups for child observations. These should be returned to the Placement Co-ordinator for monitoring.

Limitations and future research

This research was a small-scale study, and it might be interesting to broaden it to examine placement experiences of students from Early Childhood programmes in other third-level colleges. It is important to continue to review educational practices in the training of ECCE professionals to ensure that students are provided with the best preparation possible, and in doing this, it is important to obtain the views of students studying for the profession.

Appendix: Questionnaire

ECCE students' perceptions of their first practice placement at I.T. Sligo

This questionnaire is designed to gather information on the first placement experience of ECCE students from I.T. Sligo. Your responses will help inform practice and assist the Placement Committee to plan and prepare students for placement in the future. All answers will be treated in the strictest confidence.

1. Did you enjoy your first placement experience?

Yes No Somewhat

Give reasons: _____

2. Please indicate which of the following documents you had in your possession on arrival at your placement:

Portfolio assessment descriptor
Student placement contract
(which contains your learning objectives for placement)
Intervention descriptor

If any of the above was not in your possession, please explain why:

3. Please indicate which of the following documents your placement supervisor had received from the college:

Practice placement handbook
Student assessment form for supervisor

4. In your first week at placement, please indicate which of the following occurred:

	Yes	No
You were welcomed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You received induction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You were allocated a supervisor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You had a meeting with your supervisor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You discussed your learning objectives for placement with your supervisor in the first week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered NO to any of the above please explain why:

5. You were allocated a placement supervisor in the workplace to support your learning while on placement.

	Yes	No
Did you have weekly meetings with your placement supervisor?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was your placement supervisor supportive of the tasks you had to complete while on placement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did your placement supervisor give you constructive feedback?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix Continued

6. You were allocated a visiting tutor from college to support your learning while on placement.

	Yes	No
Were you supported by your visiting tutor?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Could you discuss openly any concerns you may have had with your visiting tutor?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. How would you rate the level of challenge of each task you had to complete on placement?

	Extremely Challenging	Challenging	Manageable	Easy	Very Easy
Regular entries in your reflective journal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Six child observations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seven portfolio tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Planned Intervention	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you picked 'challenging' or 'extremely challenging' to any of the above please explain why:

8. Please indicate which of the following age group you had access to in your placement to carry out your six observations:

Under 12 months old	Children aged 1–3	Children aged 4–6
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. If you did not have access to babies in your placement please indicate how you arranged to observe the 0–1 age group:

a friend's baby	a neighbour's baby	a relative's baby	other (please specify)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. How well prepared were you for carrying out child observations?

Very prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please explain why _____

11. How well prepared were you for carrying out an intervention while on placement?

Very prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please explain why _____

12. Overall, how well prepared, by your placement preparation classes, were you for placement?

Very prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please explain why _____

Appendix Continued

13. How would you rate the usefulness of the following sections of your assessment portfolio to your learning?

	Not useful	Useful	Very useful
Section 1: Introduction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section 2: Service Profile	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section 3: Learning Objectives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section 4: Planned Intervention	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section 5: Reflective Essay	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section 6: Reflections of visit to another service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section 7: Conclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you thought any section was not useful please explain why _____

14. Throughout your 13 week placement you were required to keep a reflective journal. Did this assist when writing your reflective essay?

Yes	Somewhat	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please explain why _____

15. Please indicate which of the following skills/competencies you gained during placement. I am able to ...

	No	Beginning to	Yes
Link the theory of child development to practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carry out child observations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carry out an intervention with a child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use toys and equipment to play with children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use arts and crafts to enhance child development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Work as part of a team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep routine records	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Write reflectively	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Any further suggestions or comments for developing the First Practice Placement?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
Best of luck as you continue with your studies and your second placement in Year 3.

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